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ABSTRACT

Building principals who demonstrate positive language arts leadership can have a major impact on children's literacy learning. Even extremely busy administrators can find time to read educational newspapers and newsletters, which provide pertinent information about forthcoming workshops and conferences, professional and instructional resources, and educational innovations that have been implemented successfully. When administrators and teachers work cooperatively, they increase the chances of creating a shared vision that benefits children. Administrators and staff members also need to support different learning styles and assessment strategies. Another "big picture" consideration is to stimulate students' lifelong love of reading. Administrators need to involve parents in their children's literacy learning. If principals are uncomfortable with such roles, they should delegate them to qualified individuals, including assistant principal, coordinator, consultant, or lead teacher. (Contains eight references.) (RS)

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Guidelines for successful reading leaders

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An effective reading program depends on a number of factors, including a shared vision of what the program should be, highly competent and caring teachers, a wide variety of instructional resources, and active involvement of parents. These and other factors are more likely to interact appropriately when the building principal becomes a key player.

In **The Reading Resource Handbook for School Leaders**, Maschoff and Ransom (1996) provide numerous suggestions for improving school reading programs. Not surprisingly, of the 13 criteria they list for outstanding programs, the first highlights effective instructional leadership and a shared vision for the programs.

During the past several decades, I have been fortunate to work with admirable building principals who have served as successful reading leaders. These experiences as well as the related professional literature have taught me that successful instructional leadership is demonstrated in different ways. For example, a building principal may believe that the most effective way of initiating the whole language philosophy is through teacher-led staff development, whereas another principal may encourage the same philosophy through informal discussion and experimentation. Although the first approach is more formal and the latter approach is more grass-roots, both perspectives can lead to successful outcomes. Specifically, the two administrators may have based decision-making on the personalities, strengths, and expectations of the staff as well as the budget, uniqueness of the schools, and other

considerations. Thus, the different ways of supporting whole language are reasonably matched with the potential of the learning environments.

In this paper, I suggest guidelines for successful reading leadership. These guidelines are neither prescriptive nor comprehensive. They can serve as a worthwhile source of support, however, when they are used in concert, are considered in the context of schools' needs, and are supported by cooperative efforts.

- **Keep up-to-date concerning language arts and related fields.** By serving as reading-role models, principals inspire teachers and other staff members to value professional literature. Journals, monographs, and books are among the major resources that present useful information for improving instruction. Even extremely busy administrators can find time to read educational newspapers and newsletters, which provide pertinent information about forthcoming workshops and conferences, professional and instructional resources, and educational innovations that have been implemented successfully.

Among these "ready references" is **Reading Today**, a bimonthly newspaper of the International Reading Association, which regularly features such columns as "Ideas for Administrators," "Parents and Reading," and "In the Classroom." Another useful resource is **The Council Chronicle**, published by the National Council of Teachers of English. More directly related to building principals' "comfort zone" are **Education Update**

(Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), **Research Bulletin** (Phi Delta Kappa), and **Education Life** (**The New York Times**). Recent issues of these publications have covered important topics, including challenges of inclusion, grade retention and school dropout, and how to train new educators.

Updated educational leaders have more to bring to informal and formal observations of classroom lessons, pre- and post-observation conferences, faculty meetings, study group gatherings, Parent-Teacher-Student-Association meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and board of education presentations. Although being well-read does not guarantee effective leadership, it does suggest that these administrators are committed to growing professionally and that they are able to engage in substantive sharing when dealing with issues concerning language arts and related fields. Informed principals also inspire the faculty to read educational literature, share worthwhile ideas, apply pertinent findings across the curriculum, and, thus, enjoy a journey toward lifetime professional growth.

- **Work cooperatively with the staff.** Professional growth that is based on substance and caring provides opportunities for the key players to merge their individual perspectives into a group perspective. Administrators who visualize themselves as part of a team can have a positive impact on supporting the team's efforts to reach consensus about important issues. The general scenario involves the principal, teachers, teaching assistants, community members, and children working cooperatively to create a

shared vision, develop "big picture" goals and objectives, and consider related strategies, activities, resources, and assessments. Volunteers who serve on the team are flexible, represent their constituents, demonstrate commitment to professional growth, and value consensus building. In this context, the administrator is a democratic part of the process and does not dictate authoritative points of view. Instead, he or she listens attentively, articulates his or her own opinions, and encourages group decision-making. The principal also invites team members to join active discussions during faculty meetings, P.T.S.A. presentations, and student assembly programs. Feedback from these and other forums provides the team with additional insights, which, in turn, further enriches the cooperative decision-making process. Although this grass-roots scenario is complex and time-consuming, it is worth the effort because it represents the feelings and perspectives of the varied constituents. It therefore supports broad ownership which can positively affect a lasting foundation for success.

Recently, I was a consultant to a Long Island (New York) middle school. Members of the content area staff were concerned about the quality of educational experiences that their mainstreamed special needs students were receiving during resource room instruction. Specifically, these teachers lamented the lack of congruence between the classroom and the special education setting, and they were critical of the fragmented, skills-oriented activities that were dominant in this setting. For example, across the curriculum, students were being enriched

with authentic immersion in such topics as the Holocaust, whereas in the resource room, at-risk learners were being exposed to workbook activities unrelated to classroom instruction. The building principal attempted to resolve these differences, but she encountered a wide philosophical gap between classroom teachers and special educators. Each group maintained a strong belief about how learners with special needs should be educated.

Consequently, the principal asked me to join discussions with volunteers from both groups and to provide a scaffold for bringing these caring, but dichotomous, groups together. She organized two full-day sessions, with release time for the volunteers provided by substitute teachers. She also agreed to attend both sessions. These provisions sent a clear message that the principal considered a merging of philosophies to be a major priority. My role was to listen to the different points of view, highlight successful commonalities between and among the perspectives, and help the teachers and principal realize potential for growth. As was anticipated, the philosophical differences and related discussions were intense. Toward the end of the first session, however, a sense of cooperation emerged, and during the second session, a deeper sense of cooperation became evident. I therefore suggested that we form a study group for the purpose of continuing our efforts to merge classroom and special education philosophies. I also suggested that we invite students, parents, and support staff to pertinent meetings.

During these weekly, after-school get-togethers, we discussed professional literature concerning curricular

congruence, inclusion, and other related topics. We also decided to visit schools in which the philosophies of classroom teachers and special educators were merged successfully. These experiences piqued everyone's interest and intellect, which set the stage for focused discussions during subsequent study group gatherings. For example, we became immersed in intense thought concerning the challenges of entering the 21st century and ways of helping students to meet the challenges. These discussions gave us the impetus to experiment with instructional themes, materials, strategies, skills, and assessments that support the strengths and needs of all students and that can be used effectively in both classrooms and resource rooms. The study group participants also informally observed one another in both settings, video taped some of the lessons, and shared constructive feedback. Then, they shared these experiences during study group, faculty, and P.T.S.A. meetings.

Thus far, classroom teachers and special educators have improved their cooperative planning and instructional practices for all students, including learners with special needs. These positive outcomes are supported by informal and formal observations, anecdotal records, surveys, interviews, and artifacts in students' portfolios. Furthermore, the excitement of the principal and teachers and their willingness to continue expanding their vision for all students are strong indicators of professional commitment to grow. Not surprisingly, the focus on curricular congruence is currently being extended to the concept of inclusion, and the staff is exploring a variety of related

literature, such as Villa and Thousand's (1995) **Creating an Inclusive School** and Weaver's (1994) **Success at Last! Helping Students with Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorders Achieve Their Potential.** Since the study group format has been successful, it probably will continue as a complement to staff development efforts and as a vehicle for discussing important concerns and issues, for sharing related professional literature, and for reaching consensus.

When administrators and teachers work cooperatively, they increase the chances of creating a shared vision that benefits children. They also develop flexibility in adapting the vision to children's changing needs and wants.

- **Support different learning styles and assessment strategies.** As staff members sense genuine cooperation, they are more likely to take risks when responding to students' learning needs. Risk-taking is especially necessary today because educators are being challenged with mainstreaming, inclusion, detracking, and other restructuring efforts to reach students with learning difficulties, cultural diversity, attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder, and so forth. Thus, teachers and administrators are becoming increasingly aware that no single instructional approach will benefit this broad range of needs. Regrettably, direct teaching, content-area textbooks, and related tests still represent the dominant teaching-learning methodology used in many U.S. schools. This limited context, however, does not adequately support learners who respond more favorably to

visual imagery, illustrated material, physical activity, small-group interaction, reflective writing, or a combination of these and other considerations. Educators should therefore consider varied approaches to instruction and assessment when reaching out to all students.

For example, before engaging learners in a study unit, the teacher can use an adapted version of a multiple intelligences (MI) inventory, such as the one developed by Armstrong (1994). Since determining individuals' multiple intelligences is a complex process, Armstrong suggests that educators first grasp the basic tenets of MI theory and then respond, themselves, to "An MI Inventory for Adults." This inventory is based on the seminal work of Gardner (1983, 1991, & 1993). Specifically, the inventory pursues information about seven intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. After each intelligence, ten statements are provided. When responding to each category, individuals check only the statements that apply to them. Thus, under linguistic intelligence, a respondent might check statements, such as "Books are very important to me"; under spatial intelligence, the same respondent might check a number of items, including "I prefer looking at reading material that is heavily illustrated."

When teachers have administered the inventory to themselves and have pursued ways of developing multiple intelligences in their lives, they can more comfortably administer the inventory to their students. Although children possess all seven

intelligences and benefit from opportunities to develop all seven, Gardner reminds us that they demonstrate proclivities in specific intelligences. Learners are therefore more apt to engage successfully in a study unit when their strengths are highlighted. According to Armstrong, a child with a linguistic strength thinks in words, loves writing and reading, and needs writing tools, books, and discussions. If this individual also demonstrates a spatial preference, he or she most likely thinks in images and pictures, loves designing and visualizing, and needs art, films, illustrated books, and imagination activities. Armstrong suggests that teachers develop profiles of children's preferred learning styles and that these profiles be used as a basis for increasing children's chances of success during classroom instruction.

Interestingly, teaching strategies that are open-ended not only accommodate individunals' learning styles but also support a broad range of learners. For example, when linguistic intelligence is being emphasized, the vast majority of students will benefit from storytelling, brainstorming, tape recording, journal writing, and publishing. Similarly, when spatial intelligence is being stressed, virtually every learner will grow from visualization, color cues, picture metaphors, idea sketching, and graphic symbols. Armstrong suggests these and other worthwhile strategies as positive vehicles for reaching all children.

As learners progress through a study unit, they need opportunities to be observed and to receive constructive

feedback. Both observing and documenting students' problem-solving processes and products in naturalistic environments are the most important aspects of authentic assessment. Fortunately, Armstrong provides a variety of ways in which teachers can document children's preferred learning styles. These include audio cassettes, video tapes, anecdotal records, photography, interviews, sociograms, student-kept charts, checklists, and student journals.

When children realize that their strengths in learning are embraced and their unique ways of responding are respected, they probably will take risks and will attempt to expand their horizons. The foundation is therefore set for encouraging immediate success as well as exploring unknown territory. Not surprisingly, individuals who initially express themselves only through one or two learning styles or intelligences might demonstrate more confidence with different approaches to learning. Teachers and administrators should provide children with many opportunities to grow, and this instructional direction should be a priority.

- **Promote lifetime literacy through reading immersion.** Another "big-picture" consideration is to stimulate students' lifelong love of reading. Having enjoyable reading experiences every day increases the chances that children will read throughout their lives. Even individuals whose learning strengths are not in the linguistic domain still benefit from pleasurable experiences with books. What, then, is needed to create the kind of learning

environment that supports the lifetime reading habit?

Foremost is a positive professional attitude about using school time for recreational reading. The building principal and classroom teachers are key players in establishing a policy for daily reading. Through their efforts, "real" reading is considered to be a vital activity for applying skills and strategies, increasing domain-specific and structural knowledge, improving fluency, and, of course, developing the reading habit.

Also needed are school and classroom libraries with a wide variety of resources written at different levels. These resources include fiction and nonfiction books, anthologies, chapter books, illustrated materials, pamphlets, brochures, comics, magazines, newspapers, audio-books, and computer software. Schools with e-mail capabilities and with connections to the Internet provide additional opportunities for children to read and respond to authentic messages.

When the library collection is well-matched with a broad range of strengths and interests, students need time to browse, skim, discuss, and eventually select reading materials. They also need time to read and to share ideas that they just experienced in their selections. Such sharing usually takes place during individual conferences, small-group interactions, and whole-class discussions. These experiences require more time than the daily instructional periods, which tend to focus on required curricula in most U.S. schools. Educators should therefore pursue flexible alternatives that consider a commitment to both promoting lifetime literacy and maintaining curricular

standards. For example, schoolwide sustained silent reading (SSR) provides time for developing the lifelong reading habit and also highlights administrators, teachers, students, secretaries, and custodians as reading-role models. Moreover, SSR can be spaced at different times during the week and can be incorporated into the classroom, gymnasium, guidance office, playground, and lunchroom. Thus, opportunities abound not only for instilling learners with a love of reading, but also for supporting curricular standards and related activities. Block scheduling represents another alternative use of time. It involves 80-minute instructional periods several times a week, during which students can become immersed in pleasurable reading and in subject-matter requirements.

Administrators and teachers who support these and other efforts demonstrate a balanced perspective. Learners will certainly benefit from this perspective because their interests, strengths, and needs are nurtured as a foundation for lifelong growth.

- **Involve parents in their children's literacy learning.** Students' literacy growth is further enhanced when their parents are engaged in a partnership with the school. Effective partnerships involve an interaction between parents and educators, in which both are focused on mutual expectations and goals for learners. This shared vision is different from an educational prescription that dictates what is best for parents and their children. Rather, parents, teachers, and

administrators should come together as equal partners who have something of value to offer. Interestingly, this mutual desire to enrich children's literacy learning can be incorporated into tangible actions that are appropriately matched with the community and school cultures.

For example, educators could reach out to parents through newsletters, P.T.S.A. orientations, coffee klatches, parent-teacher conferences, invitations to informally observe and discuss classroom practices, and other communication outlets. These experiences provide opportunities for understanding and developing sensitivity to the feelings, attitudes, and potential contributions of parents and educators. Such efforts also demonstrate commitment to creating serious home-school connections.

Both parents and educators are now able to benefit from specific conversations that enrich literacy learning. Attending an evening meeting each week is one way of encouraging such conversations. During the first get-together, the principal gives a warm welcome and shows strong support for helping parents and teachers become equal partners in supporting children's learning. He or she also engages them in discussions that not only stimulate purpose, cooperation, and bonding, but also generate pertinent agendas for subsequent meetings.

Thus, future get-togethers might focus on important information about different cultures. For instance, some ethnic groups do not encourage their children to make eye contact with adults because this nonverbal behavior is considered

disrespectful. Likewise, expressing emotion in the classroom and in other public places is not permitted in certain cultures.

DuCharme, Poplin, and Thomas (1995) provide useful insights about cultural factors that affect writing instruction. While focusing on expository discourse, the authors remind us that preferred approaches vary across cultures. In the United States, writers are expected to initially tell their audience what they are going to write about, then tell their message in more detail, and finally summarize what they have just presented. Other cultures consider this expository approach to be demeaning. Specifically, in romance languages, writers engage in creative diversions as they express themselves in eloquent and elaborate ways. In Asian languages, writers typically use the eight-legged essay in which they develop eight ideas alluding to the central theme. In both contexts, readers are expected to interpret the meaning for themselves. DuCharme, Poplin, and Thomas believe that this cultural awareness should move teachers toward explicit teaching which demonstrates differences in writing, gives exposure to a variety of discourse types, and clarifies the reasons and the contexts for using different discourse.

Although this information does not apply to every child in a particular ethnic group, it does increase an awareness of potentially diverse responses to classroom teaching. It also provides opportunities to modify the learning environment so that it is more sensitive to culturally based learning styles. In addition to sharing this information during parent-educator get-togethers, subsequent meetings might focus on other topics, such

as becoming a lifetime reader and writer, using the library media center and the local public library as major resources, building and activating prior knowledge, applying study strategies and skills, and maintaining quality discussions between parents and their children.

Mutual, interactive approaches such as these are not panaceas, but they represent a serious sense of direction for promoting effective partnerships between parents and educators. This perspective also provides learners with benefits that will last a lifetime.

Successful reading leaders make a difference

Building principals who demonstrate positive language arts leadership can have a major impact on children's literacy learning. Although these individuals fulfill many vital roles, I have focused on their keeping up-to-date with professional literature, working cooperatively with the faculty, encouraging different approaches to learning and assessment, supporting lifetime literacy efforts, and motivating genuine home-school connections. If principals are uncomfortable with such roles, they should delegate them.to qualified individuals, including assistant principal, coordinator, consultant, or lead teacher.

Within the space limitations of this paper, I have not highlighted other important aspects of reading leadership. For example, principals or their designees should consider supporting literature-based practices across the curriculum, motivating

read-alouds through the grades, organizing a visiting authors' program, including at-risk learners in heterogeneous classes, hiring and maintaining qualified reading professionals, involving teachers in innovative staff development efforts that focus on teachers as learners, and asking for feedback about reading leadership performance. The possibilities are endless and exciting.

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